Manufactured Affection: How the Media Helped Create the Modern Dog Economy

By ChatGPT May 2026

A curious thing has happened over the past three decades. Dogs, once regarded as companion animals with specific biological and behavioural needs, have been transformed into surrogate children, emotional support systems, lifestyle accessories and vehicles for commercial extraction. The language tells the story. We no longer hear simply of dog owners. We hear of "pet parents", "fur babies" and "furkids". The shift may appear harmless, even sentimental, but its implications are profound.

Across the Western world an enormous emotional, commercial and political superstructure has arisen around companion animals, especially dogs. Veterinary corporations, pet-food multinationals, pharmaceutical firms, insurers, behavioural consultants, influencers, rescue organisations, breeders, media outlets and social-media platforms all benefit from a permanently heightened emotional state in which rational scrutiny becomes difficult and sometimes unwelcome.

At the centre of this transformation sits the media.

No outlet better illustrates the problem than *The New York Times*.

A steady stream of dog-related articles now appears in its pages: dogs as family, dogs as healers, dogs as emotional anchors, dogs in restaurants, dogs in offices, dogs in hotels, dogs in airports, dogs on aeroplanes, dogs as lifestyle identity. Even longevity biotechnology for dogs is increasingly treated not as a subject requiring deep ethical and commercial scrutiny but as another frontier of emotionally framed consumer aspiration.

One article in isolation means little. But when viewed collectively over time, a pattern emerges. The cumulative effect is not journalism in the traditional sense of independent inquiry. It is cultural conditioning.

Importantly, this conditioning rarely arrives through explicit propaganda. Modern influence systems are subtler than that. Editors need not receive direct instructions from advertisers. Journalists need not knowingly promote an agenda. Once emotional assumptions become embedded within institutions, entire editorial ecosystems begin reproducing them automatically.

The result is a feedback loop.

The public becomes emotionally invested in dogs at an ever-higher intensity. Commercial industries arise to service and amplify those emotions. Media organisations report and celebrate the resulting culture. The expanded coverage further deepens emotional attachment and commercial opportunity. The cycle then reinforces itself.

Cyberneticians would recognise the process immediately.

Meanwhile the central unanswered question receives remarkably little sustained investigative attention:

What has the industrialisation and commercialisation of pet care done to the health and welfare of animals themselves?

That question should sit at the centre of modern veterinary and public-interest journalism. Instead, it remains largely marginalised.

Vet Tom Lonsdale has long argued that the processed pet-food industry has created an epidemic of chronic disease in companion animals while simultaneously shaping veterinary education, veterinary research and veterinary practice. The consequences extend far beyond bad teeth and itchy skin. They include obesity, diabetes, inflammatory disease, behavioural abnormalities, escalating medicalisation and enormous economic dependency upon lifelong treatment.

Yet despite the scale of the issue, major media institutions rarely investigate the underlying commercial structures. The silence is striking.

Why?

The answer probably lies less in conspiracy than in institutional convergence.

Large media organisations increasingly depend upon integrated commercial models: advertising partnerships, sponsored content, affiliate marketing, lifestyle branding and audience retention strategies tied to emotion and identity. In such an environment, hard scrutiny of emotionally profitable industries becomes progressively less likely.

The New York Times itself now operates within a hybrid commercial ecosystem extending far beyond traditional reporting. Wirecutter affiliate recommendations, branded-content studios and commerce-driven engagement models blur the once clearer distinction between journalism and consumer marketing. Even where formal editorial independence exists, subtle systemic pressures remain.

The danger is not necessarily corruption in the crude sense.

The greater danger is cultural capture.

Journalists, editors and readers alike become immersed within the same emotional-commercial atmosphere. Certain assumptions become almost untouchable. Dogs are inherently beneficial. More intervention equals more care. Commercialisation equals progress. Longevity technology equals compassion. Emotional attachment itself becomes treated as evidence of moral virtue.

Questioning the system then risks social penalties.

Anyone who asks whether modern dog culture may be unhealthy, ecologically destabilising or commercially manipulated can quickly be dismissed as uncaring, eccentric or anti-animal.

But difficult questions remain.

Why are so many modern pets chronically diseased?

Why has veterinary medicine become increasingly dependent upon pharmaceutical and processed-food models?

Why are biological and evolutionary perspectives so often overshadowed by commercial therapeutics?

Why do major media outlets devote extensive coverage to dog culture while largely ignoring structural critiques of the industries surrounding it?

And perhaps most importantly:

Why has the modern dog become such a powerful emotional commodity?

The economic incentives are immense. The global pet-care market now runs into hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Processed food alone represents a gigantic and recurrent revenue stream. A biologically healthy dog eating inexpensive raw meaty bones and requiring little veterinary intervention is not especially profitable. A medically managed, emotionally indispensable, highly serviced “fur baby” is vastly more valuable.

That reality may sound uncomfortable. Nonetheless it deserves examination.

None of this means dogs are unworthy of affection. Quite the reverse. Genuine respect for animals requires understanding their biological nature rather than projecting onto them an exaggerated substitute-human identity manufactured for commercial purposes.

Nor does it require hostility toward journalists. Many reporters are undoubtedly sincere and compassionate people attempting to respond to audience interests. But sincerity does not eliminate systemic bias. Entire industries and professions can drift together inside shared assumptions without conscious coordination.

History provides many examples.

Tobacco companies once embedded themselves deeply within medicine, advertising and public culture. Ultra-processed food manufacturers cultivated relationships with researchers, institutions and media organisations for decades before widespread scrutiny emerged. Pharmaceutical influence within medicine is now extensively documented.

Why should the pet-food and companion-animal industries be uniquely exempt from similar investigation?

A genuinely independent press would not merely celebrate dogs and the emotional economies surrounding them. It would investigate the commercial systems shaping those emotions. It would examine the relationships between pet-food manufacturers, veterinary schools, corporate practice groups, pharmaceutical companies and media ecosystems. It would ask who benefits financially from the perpetual expansion of dependency, treatment and consumption.

Most importantly, it would consider whether modern society's sentimental relationship with dogs is serving animals themselves — or serving industries built around them.

At present, much of the media appears unwilling even to ask the question.

That reluctance may prove one of the most important untold stories of our time.